Bobbert's Merry Christmas.

By Josephine Dodge Daskam.

"AND that's how I came to be born in a manger!" Bobbert concluded.

The baby nodded, her mouth a comprehending bud, her eyes big with interest.

"Nuv' 'tory! Tell Babe nuv' 'tory!" she demanded.

"So then the wise men came. They were shepherds. They came with their flocks by night—"

"Huh?"

"Flocks by night, I say. It was something they had. They brought me some Frank's incense—"

"Unka F'ank! Goo-ood Unka F'ank!"

"Will you keep still? It wasn't that Frank."

"Warum nicht?" inquired the baby, with a startling intelligibility. Her German, for some reason best known to herself, was as distinct as her English was garbled.

"Because it isn't, silly. Uncle Frank isn't a wise man—he's a p'fessor in college. And they brought me—"

"Look here, Bobbert, what on earth are you talking about?"

"I'm telling her all about Christmas, Uncle Frank." Bobbert removed the corner of the rug from the baby's mouth and handed her her silk rag doll. "Minna said to amuse her, and I was. About the manger I was telling—"

"So I heard. But why do you cast it in that form precisely? You see, you weren't born in one, and—and—er—you really oughtn't to talk that way, don't you know?"

"Why wasn't I?"

"Because you weren't."

"Well, where was I, then?"

"You were born in this house."

"Where in this house?"

"Where? Why, upstairs, I suppose."

"Are people always born upstairs?"

"Usually."

"Never born downstairs at all? Didn't you ever know anybody that was born down—"

"Oh, stop, Bobbert! Go on amusing your sister. You have a genius for pure idiocy. Where's your mother?"

Bobbert's face fell. The baby tore off a bit of her doll and swallowed it unrebuked—it was one of her swallowing days—and began wetting her finger and following in a smudgy outline the figures on the Kate Greenaway wallpaper without one reprimand from her brother.

"'F I'm goin' to have a tree I want to make it myself. They're all down in the lib'r'y, and I have to keep out. They've got a ladder in there, too. And they laugh all the time. I have to stay here with her! What's the good o' callin' it my tree if I can't help? Aunt Helena says won't my eyes pop out when I see; but they won't."

("Hadn't she better keep the doll to play with and eat something else?")

"I think I might go in! Here, stop eating that, Baby! Let go! Somebody fell off the ladder, too, and there I was out in the hall! I don't believe they had the little back thing up that keeps it from doubling up. What's the good of a tree, anyway?"

("Do you think she improves the wall paper with that border? Perhaps the color comes off.")

"Here, stop that! Don't suck your hand, Baby. Oh, goodness! I wish Minna was here. I'm not a nurse. I never made such a fuss when I was little, I know. If I had a tree for anybody I'd let them have the fun of it. Wouldn't you?"

His audience looked uncertain. In his heart he felt that his nephew was right, but prudence restrained him, and he rose to go with a temporizing air. "Well, you know, it's usually done this way," he suggested. "It's supposed to be in the nature of a surprise. If you arranged the whole thing there wouldn't be anybody to surprise, would there?"

Bobbert sniffed. "Oh, if you stay out we could s'prise you, I s'pose," he said, somewhat cynically.

"But I've seen so many trees——" The defense was very feeble, and he knew it.

"Oh, all right," said Bobbert testily, jerking the baby away from the high fender. "And they're popping corn over the fire in there; I heard it pop. And Aunt Helena said that it was so good sugared, and that fat one—the one with the yellow mustache—said that he should think all that she ate would taste——"

"How do you know what they said?"

"I heard."

"How?"

"I heard."

"How did you hear?"

"Through the keyhole!" Bobbert set his jaw and twisted a piece of the baby's dress nervously.

"And since when have you adopted that method of obtaining information, Robertson?"

"I don't care! I only did a moment! I don't care if it is sneaky—I might just as well be sneaky if I'm not going to Annapolis. If I do anything at all, everybody says: 'Oh, dear! I'm afraid you'll never be a lieutenant after all. They never do so!' And if I say I'm going to be one, they say, 'I wouldn't count on it, Bobbert,' till I'm just sick and tired! Am I going to Annapolis? Am I? I don't care about the old tree if I know that."

"My dear boy, how do I know? It will depend on—on—on circumstances," he concluded weakly.

Bobbert stamped his foot. His uncle slipped out of the room.

In the library the tree was towering to completion. A gilt angel held ropes of popcorn that straggled artistically downward; snowy, ribbon-bound packets dangled from the boughs; candles dotted the ends. Aunts and uncles chattered and laughed and quarreled amicably, while Bobbert's father and mother, bubbling over with delight and busyness and vague Christmas good feeling, ran about holding the same parcels, straightening the same red candle, pulling at the same rope of cranberries.

"Isn't it grand, Frank? This is really the best we've ever had. How are the children? Do they suspect anything?"

"Nothing—nothing whatever," he assured her. "Bobbert thinks the odor of hemlock and popcorn is to be attributed to the window boxes, and I have no doubt that he supposes you're conducting a funeral down here. It's so still and solemn."

"Oh, Frank, how absurd! Well, I suppose he does begin to suspect—"

"My dear sister, your penetration does you credit. Bobbert is only 9, and he has only seen this performance nine times, so it would be odd if he should have any exact idea of what you are all doing, but he probably has a dim—"

"Now, Frank, you are tiresome. Of course he knows, but how can he know the size of it? He never saw one so big. And we never had so many candles—there are three boxes here. And look at this. What do you think Uncle Ritch has sent him?"

One of the aunts waved at him a set of red, blue and yellow balls attached by elastic cords to a brightly colored stick.

"I suppose the dear old man thinks Bobbert is about two years old! Where have you put that Japanese juggler's outfit, Kate? See, Frank, that beautiful French puzzle! It's awfully interesting. I hope he'll like it. More candy? The idea! The child would die! Where's Father Robertson's bird book, dear? I shan't dare let him take it alone it's too exquisite. See, Frank, there are 250 colored plates. Isn't it beautiful?"

Bobbert's uncle fell upon the book. "By George!" he said, "but that's a beauty! Rather wasted on Bobbert, isn't it? Doesn't know an ostrich from a canary, does he?"

"Well, that's what Father Robertson wants him to learn!" they cried in chorus.

He nodded doubtfully. "Pity he can't come in and help," he suggested, "he'd enjoy this rumpus."

They stared at him in consternation.

"Why, Francis Robertson, what are you thinking of? Have Bobbert help on his own tree? Are you crazy?"

"I suppose it wouldn't do," he admitted, "but you see that's just what a little fellow likes—all the noise and fuss and running about and the—smells," he added vaguely.

"The smells?" demanded Bobbert's mother.

"The hemlock and the candy and the new smell of all the things," he persisted.

"In short," said the fat one with the yellow mustache, looking up from a box of many-colored baubles with which he and Aunt Helena were playing in undisguised joy, "just what we like!"

"Precisely," remarked Uncle Frank.

"Really," said Aunt Kate, somewhat stiffly, "if Bobbert and Babe should help about the tree, I can't quite see whom we'd call in to see it this evening! What are we working so hard for—to please ourselves?"

"Oh, no! great heavens, no!" cried Uncle Frank.

Bobbert's father appeared with an armful of steel rails and crosspieces. "What do you say to this, Robertson?" he called delightedly. "Jove! these are heavy. Three switches to the thing, and you ought to see the engine! There's a parlor car, a smoker and two passengers. See the tender? Jove! I call that pretty good. Ring the bell, Kate. Look at that piston rod, Frank!"

They clustered about him excitedly.

"Father sent it round just now. Wouldn't tell what he paid for the thing. You clamp it down to the carpet—right through it goes. There are forty-two feet of railing—how's that? Four curves and three switches—regular thing, you know. We'll put it right through the library, across the hall and loop it back in front of the conservatory. What do you say?"

"Won't he be delighted?" sighed the aunts.

"Can we get it down before evening?" said Bobbert's mother nervously.

"Well, I should say so!" The fat one with the yellow mustache seized an armful of rails and began to study the joinings; Bobbert's father and Uncle Christopher explained the switch workings eagerly to each other, and Bobbert's mother flew about wondering how the rugs would stand it, and picturing Bobbert's joy as the train puffed out from the base of the tree.

"This is great!" Uncle Christopher cried, as the rails went down with wonderful celerity. "Haven't had such fun in an age! Half the fun's in getting it ready!"

The fat one with the mustache glanced up and caught Uncle Frank's eye.

"Perhaps he'd rather——"

Bobbert's mother shook her head at them. "Now stop right there," she said merrily, "if you're going to suggest that he should come down and help! You don't seem to see my plan at all, Frank. I want this thing to be perfect—I want it all to burst on him at once. How can we put it down in the evening when we're all dressed? And there wouldn't be time, anyway. Oh, Chris, you didn't get him that, too? See that lovely dog collar! And the chain, too! Now Don will look respectable. Just step upstairs, won't you Frank, and keep Bob on that floor till supper? Minna will bring it to him up there. He'll see the rails, you see, if he comes down into the hall. Helena, if you and Mr. Ferris eat any more of that broken candy, you'll certainly be sick. No, I don't mean ill—I mean plain sick."

"Do you mean to say you're not going to let that child out into the dining room? He'll be so disgusted there'll be no managing him."

Bobbert's mother looked plaintive. "I wish to heaven, Frank," she said, "that you had some children of your own! Perhaps you wouldn't be so ridiculous then. How on earth is it going to hurt Bobbert, tonight of all nights, to stay in the nursery a few hours, just so that we may all toil for his own particular amusement? Tell him a story or something. We'll barely have time——"

A burst of laughter interrupted her. Uncle Christopher had wound up the train and started it on what extent of rail was already laid, to his own great comfort and the disgust of Bobbert's father and the fat one with the mustache, who shrieked at him to "stop it off," and nervously waved their hands at the engine as it hove down upon the unfinished curve at the hearth rug, while Aunt Helena waved a red flag wildly and Aunt Kate began ta pass around a hat for a purse for "the brave girl who risked her life so gallantly to save the train."

He left them with a chuckle, and began to mount the stairs two steps at a time, just saving himself from falling upon a huddled group at the top of the flight.

"What are they doing in the hall, Bobbert demanded, abruptly, clutching the baby's skirts with one hand and supporting himself in a peering attitude with the other. "What makes 'em scream that way? Why do they say 'Down brakes?' Is it a game? When Aunt Helena laughs and laughs that way, she usually cries afterward."

Uncle Frank towed them back into the nursery and led the conversation storyward, but Bobbert was not to be beguiled.

"I'm tired of stories. I'd rather be down stairs," he yawned. "I know one thing—if I get another old carpenter's set, I'll sell it tomorrow for 5 cents. I hate 'em. All I want's a boat, and I can't have that. I don't see why I can't go out, if it is snowing. I never can do a single thing I want, anyway."

"You are a little cross," observed his uncle, surveying him critically, "but I don't know that I blame you. Minna's coming up soon."

"Well, she better." Bobbert scowled at the baby, who smiled sweetly back.

"You're bad," he said shortly.

"Oh nien." she smiled.

"Oh, ja," he scowled. "You're always chewing the wrong thing. Look at your shoe, all wet! What'll Minna say?"

She screwed her face into wrinkles and shook her head, wringing her hands with Minna's gesture. "Pfui, pfui, doch! 's ist abscheulich!" she scolded.

"I don't believe you'll get a present at all," he continued.

"Babe get p'es't! Babe get big p'est!"

"Not a one! Not a one!" he persisted.

Her eyes filled; she implored him earnestly.

"P'ease, Babe get big p'es't!"

"Not a——"

"Etop teasing your sister, Bobbert. Of course she'll get a present. Why not?"

"Because she swore."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean what I say."

"When did she swear?"

"Day before yesterday night. She said she was going to be bad when she got up, and they kept at her to say she wouldn't, and she said she would. She can be the worst you ever saw."

"Worse ever saw!" echoed the baby.

"And all day they were afraid she could be, and she wasn't, and she wasn't. Not till she went to bed. And she said her prayers—that one she says, 'Herr Jesus, mild und—something—Du'—and then she just looked up at the ceiling and swore as hard as she could."

"What in the —— time did she say?"

"She said: 'O, Lord! Good heavens! Damn!'"

"Oh!"

"And she got her little hands mighty well slapped, too. She must never say it again, must you, Baby?"

The baby laughed impishly. There was no telling what more she knew.

At exactly half-past 6 the library doors flew open with a bang, the piano struck up a brilliant march and Minna escorted her charges pompously down the stairs, the baby in white, Bobbert in a blue sailor suit.

Around the gleaming tree stood a ring of aunts, uncles and grandparents, flushed and happy.

"Merry Christmas, Bobbert! Merry Christmas, Babe! How do you like it? Isn't it grand? See the angel? See the popcorn? Don't look at the floor yet! (No, it isn't time so soon. Chris will start it.) Well, was it lovely, bless her little heart? Wunderschon, liebchen, nicht wahr?"

Bobbert smiled perfunctorily at the tree, blinked a little, leaped through the ring of bright-frocked relatives, and fell upon a red-faced, apologetic man standing with the group of delighted servants near the door.

"Hello, David!" he cried. "When did you come back? Are you going to stay? Did you know I could swim? Will you tell me a story tonight?"

David, whose only fault was too great an attachment to the cup that cheered him too frequently, and who had been devoted to Bobbert, coughed deprecatingly and explained: "Only dropped in for the tree, Mr. Bob, you papa havin' asked me in with the rest. And a fine tree it is, I'm sure. I expect most o' them presents will be for you, Mr. Bob."

David prefixed the title of respect in public, but his private relations with Bobbert had been anything but formal.

Aunt Kate, dancing with impatience, had begun to detach the presents from the lower boughs, and soon they were piling up around him.

"Master Robertson Wheeler! Master Robertson Wheeler—oh, Bobbert, that's a whopping fine present. Miss Dorothea Wheeler! Siehst du, mien susses kind? Master Robertson Wheeler! See what Uncle Rich sent you, Bob! He forgot how you had grown!"

They were laughing, explaining, thanking, eating, all at once.

"Adn the candy mother'll kep till tomorrow. Now, Bob, see! nder the tree!"

The engine rattled proudly forth. The uncles and aunts fell upon it.

"There! I told you it wasn't oiled enough! See, where the smokestack joins on. Will she take the curve by the rug? See, Bobbert, how the switches work! Real switches! Father! Here, this way, Father Robertson! Mr. Ferris is going to work the switch. Isn't it wonderful, Bobbert? It's from Grandpa Wheeler. Thank him. It goes through the hall. Oh, Kate, you can't work that switch, can you. See Aunt Kate work the switch, dear."

Bobbert watched it curiously. He ran forward to the third switch.

"Want to see how it goes, Bob? Here, I'll work it for you. It's a little catchy at first. Yes, indeed. Mr. Robertson, we had more fun than a little getting this ready, I assure you. Quite complete, isn't it?"

Uncle Christopher began to juggler with the Japanese outfit, to the intense delight of the servants. The aunties and Mr. Ferris played with the engine, explaining its mechanism to the wondering grandfathers. Grandma Wheeler marveled at the French dissecting puzzle. Bobbert's mother, happily guarding the candy, laughed at the baby who, harnessed into the dog collar, pranced along before her father, waving the colored balls in the air, a woolly lamb under her free arm. The merry moments passed.

Suddenly Grandfather Wheeler looked up from the bird book, which he was sharing with Uncle Frank. "But where is Robertson, jr.?" he inquired mildly.

They stared. "Why, right here," they said. But he was not right there.

Uncle Frank looked about comprehensively at the relatives and smiled a superior smile. Then his eye fell on the bird book in his lap, and the smile changed its quality.

He glanced at the ring of servants. "And where is David," he added. Suddenly he sprang to his feet. "Come on!" he said. "We'll find him. Don't make a noise—walk softly, now."

And still holding the presents, they trooped after him through the hall, Bobbert's mother close to the leader, the aunties and Mrs. Ferris at the end of the line. Through the dining room, through the wide pantry, through the hall and up to the kitchen door they tiptoed.

Uncle Frank paused a moment, nodded, and made room for Bobbert's father, while the grandfathers crowded up and the aunties peered under and over.

On the floor before the well swept kitchen hearth sat David. Beside him, a little space away, squatted Bobbert, a long hockey stick in his hand. Between them were arranged large pieces of coal from the hod, arranged in what appeared to be ninepin patterns.

"I shall attack from the right at daybreak. You'll see what the mosquito fleet can do, Mr. David. Your clumsy old Spanish ships can't move quick enough, can they?"

"Wait and see, Bob, my boy."

"This coal makes dandy ships, don't it? A lot of coal would be a fine present, wouldn't it? They use wood upstairs, and I don't believe I could get hold of any. Are you enjoying yourself, David?"

"You bet I am, Bob. Put your flagship in line."

"Well, I will. She was out for—for repairs. When I go skating, David, I'll never use any other hockey stick. I wanted a black one next to a boat. You were lovely to give it to me. I'll be big enough for a boat next year, I hope."

"Well, now it's daybreak. Lieutenant, are you ready?"

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Begin the fight!"

"Aye, aye, sir."

The coal flew about thick and fast, the commanders shuffled the lumps into place, cheering and encouraging their officers and crews. Ship after ship sank to rise no more in a clatter of coal on the hearth.

Under cover of the noise Uncle Frank led them away, silent, through the empty rooms, to where the deserted Christmas tree sheltered only Minna, cooing German cradle songs to her sleeping baby.

"Now, look here," he said. "Let's be sensible, dear people. We'll go on enjoying our presents and sports, and let Bobbert enjoy his. Why not, eh?"